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SUBJECT: UK TRADE UNIONS ALTERNATELY PURSUE ENLIGHTENED AND
NARROW SELF INTERESTS

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Sensitive but unclassified. Not for internet.

11. (SBU) Summary: The British trades union movement's annual convention was an exposition of both the broad and narrow visions of its members. At times it pursued the lofty goals of workplace equality, better conditions, skills training and opportunity. At others, its members called for the preservation of uneconomic practices simply because they benefited from them. Their icy reception of PM Blair epitomized this dichotomy: they recognized and appreciated what he has done in the Labour Party's nine years in power to promote jobs, improve the National Health Service, invest in education and reform pensions. But when he has sought to trim government spending by reducing positions, he has met with anger. The moderate General Secretary of the TUC, Brendan Barber, faces increasing difficulty holding the trades union movement near the political center, as a powerful core of big unions pulls it left. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The UK's broad union coalition, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) held its annual conference September 11 to 14 in Brighton. Comprising 64 unions, the TUC represents about 6.5 million of the 7 million organized workers in UK. Just over a quarter of the UK work force is unionized, much more so in the public sector (60% unionized) than the private (17%). A handful of recently consolidated mega-unions make up the majority of membership: the largest public sector union, Unison, has 1.3 million members. Its private sector counterpart, Amicus, has 1.2 million. Other big players are the Transport and General Workers Union (777,000) and the initials-only union, GMB (575,000). Although the unions founded the Labour Party in 1906, only 16 of the 64 unions in the TUC are also members of the Party. They are among the biggest, however, including the top four listed above. The TUC itself is not affiliated.

13. (SBU) The TUC leadership hoped to use its annual moment in the spotlight to showcase its current agenda: protecting jobs in the National Health Service; upholding legal protections for immigrant workers, so they do not undercut other jobseekers; and fighting the proposed raising of the retirement age to 68 (in 2044). As expected, however, most of the national media attention focused on the leadership battle within the Labour Party. Despite a preconference pledge by the unions to avoid public position taking, few General Secretaries could resist the temptation to share their views

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when the TV cameras were on them. A senior official at Amicus privately shook his head when his union's General Secretary, Derek Simpson, announced without prior

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consultation that his union would support Chancellor Gordon Brown's bid to replace PM Blair, who has said he will stand down within twelve months. "There is no process" the official moaned.

14. (SBU) PM Blair's last address to the TUC was the mostly widely covered event at the Congress, but not particularly groundbreaking. The handful of protestors, primarily from the hard left National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) led by their firebrand General Secretary Bob Crow, staged a choreographed walkout as Blair began. Blair responded as he always has: a Labour Government is better for the unions than a Tory one. "I simply say to people who make the protest, you are perfectly entitled to do it but realize that those hostile to a Labour government - you are doing precisely what (the Tories) want. Not very sensible," he said. The moderate members of the movement acknowledge the great strides workers have made under Blair - there are no longer "jobs marches" for example - but concede that Gordon Brown's union background will always make him more appealing to the rank and file.

15. (SBU) On the international front, the members were at their most leftist, supporting perennial resolutions in favor of Cuba and Venezuela, and more narrowly denouncing MOD plans to replace the Trident nuclear deterrent. The vote on the Trident was more divided because of the union jobs at stake in the defense industries, another example of the broad vision warring with the narrow interests. An observer from the AFL-CIO (protect) explained that Barber tends to allow the left-wing to dominate the international agenda, because it is of little consequence to the unions.

16. (SBU) Despite the anti-American flavor of many of the motions, the AFL-CIO retains its honored position as the only union invited to address the congress every year. This year's representative was William Lucy, International Secretary Treasurer of the American Federation of State,

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County and Municipal Employees and Founder-President of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. Lucy was also a

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featured speaker at a "fringe" session with Barber and TUC President Gloria Mills, its first black female President, on Tackling Racism in the Workplace. British unions are alarmed by the rise of the extreme right wing, nativist, British National Party. Lucy pointed out that it is usually not the tiny percentage of overt racist who are the problem, but the many who remain indifferent in the face of racism.

17. (SBU) Comment: The British Labor movement is very much alive, but struggling to remain relevant to workers. Membership had declined slowly in a decade, from about 33% of the workforce in 1995 to about 26% today. Ironically, as more union demands are written into national law, such as the minimum wage, improved health care and pensions, the need for union-specific protections weaken. The struggle to absorb hundreds of thousands of workers from Eastern Europe without depressing wages, however, and to oppose the government's move to streamline the public sector mean that there will continue to be scope for the unions to pursue both their broad and narrow agendas.

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